

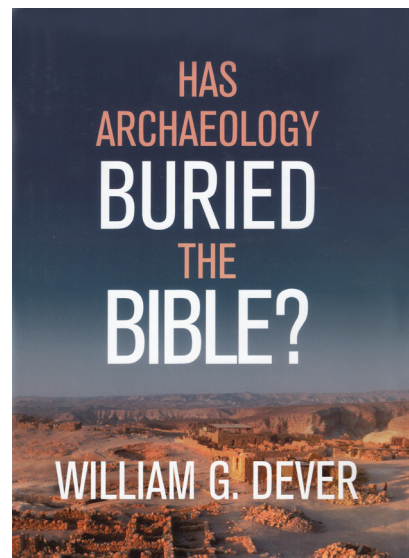
**John D. Currid, *The Case for Biblical Archaeology: Uncovering the Historical Record of God's Old Testament People*, Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, 2020; Paperback, pp. 288, illus. maps, ISBN 978-1629953601, USD 46.**

**William G Dever, *Has Archaeology Buried the Bible?*, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2020; Hardback, pp. 158, illus. maps, ISBN 978-0802877635, USD 40.**

Reviewed by Christopher J Davey

It is some years since a book on Biblical Archaeology was published, so it is interesting that two such books have appeared in the last twelve months. Both authors have extensive excavation experience in Israel but have had different teaching roles, Dever is professor emeritus of Near Eastern Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Arizona, Tucson, while Currid has been on the faculty of the Reformed Theological Seminary for much of his teaching life and has taught in the area of Old Testament. Both books are only concerned with the Hebrew Bible, the Christian Old Testament, but that is about all they have in common.

John Currid is the Carl W. McMurray Professor of Old Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary in Charlotte, where he has taught for over 20 years. He has a PhD from the Oriental Institute Chicago and has excavated in north Africa and Israel for many years. He states immediately that *The Case for Biblical Archaeology* is for students and 'In a nutshell, my goal is to provide an initial overview of the main areas of inquiry, discovery, and study of archaeology as it relates to the Hebrew



Bible' (p. xv). The Introduction follows G.E. Wright, 'Our ultimate aim must not be 'proof,' but truth' and states that 'Biblical archaeology serves to confirm, illuminate, and give "earthiness" to the Scriptures' (p. 3). The applied concept of archaeology is what is referred to as Culture-History, and post-modern processes are deemed deconstructionism and are dismissed. When explaining the nature of archaeology, the examples include Ras Shamra, Megiddo, Hezekiah's Tunnel and the Lachish Ostraca.

The first Part sets the scene by dealing with the geography of the Holy Land, the history of archaeology, excavation of a tell and the pre-history and history of the lands of the Bible. Geography is a correct archaeological place to start. The chapter is illustrated with good maps that would have benefitted from the inclusion of more place names, especially those referred to in the text. The geographical description is cursory and rather over-shadowed by political and historical themes. The chapter on archaeology describes the development of the discipline from Herculaneum until the arrival of the 'New Archaeology' in Palestine and, unlike many American treatments of the subject, it recognizes non-American contributions. Archaeological work on biblical sites outside Israel is overlooked with the exception of Heshbon.

Tell Excavation discusses tell formation and the nineteenth century discovery of tells as places of occupation. There seems to be an assumption that archaeologists know what is being found at the time of excavation. This is often not the case, so excavators must record every action so that they can revisit the excavation process when identifying and interpreting what was found. While it may be assumed that the students who read this book will perform labouring duties on site, to make the most of their experience they should be introduced to the complete archaeological process. The short history of the lands of the Bible begins with the Neolithic period and concludes with the Neo-Babylonian Empire.

Part 2 has short discussions of about forty-eight sites. As may be expected, many significant sites are not mentioned and some of those that are, are not shown on the maps. Further reading is suggested for each site.

The final Part deals with aspects of society that may be examined by archaeology. These include: agriculture and herding, water, architecture, ceramics, the Hebrew language in archaeology, burial practices, and small finds. There are a few photos included in this section, but the brief captions limit the information they provided. The Part would have benefitted from drawings of objects and plans of features under discussion. Archaeology should not be taught as a literary exercise, as so many books on Biblical Archaeology have attempted to do. Students should be exposed to objects and architecture. Yosef Garfinkel's popular book on Khirbet Qeiyafa (*In the footsteps of King David: Revelations from an Ancient Biblical City*, New York: Thames and Hudson, 2018) sets the standard for archaeological illustration in non-technical literature. Currid overlooks the important site of Khirbet Qeiyafa, Dever does not.

*The Case for Biblical Archaeology* concludes with appendices containing a Basic Timeline of the Ancient Near East, a list of the Kings of Israel and Judah and Extrabiblical References to the Kings of Israel and Judah. There is a glossary, selected bibliography and indexes.

After some time as a Gospel preacher, Bill Dever became a student of G.E. Wright at Harvard where he studied and researched in archaeology. He excavated at Shechem and became director of the Gezer excavation in the 1970s. After introducing himself and providing some scene-setting comments, Dever begins *Has Archaeology Buried the Bible?* with a brief sketch of American archaeology in the Holy Land and the advent the 'biblical revisionists in Europe, often called "minimalists"' (p. 4). He appreciates the pointlessness of the nihilism of those who consider that the Bible *cannot* be 'true' and believes that there must be middle ground between them and those who believe that the Bible *must* be 'true'. Although most of the nihilists are equally dismissive of archaeology asserting that, 'archaeology can tell us nothing', Dever argues that 'archaeology will be central to the task of writing our own revisionist histories of ancient Israel' (p. 6). He also argues that archaeology represents 'primary' evidence whereas the Old Testament text does not include eyewitness accounts because it has been edited for 'twenty centuries or more'. This is an oversimplification and an overstatement but it does make the point that archaeology is a source of valuable data often contemporary with the biblical narrative.

The major portion of the book summarises the 'main events of the biblical stories' and then evaluates them 'in the light of current archaeological evidence' (p. 6).

Dever aims to show how a 'more balanced historical portrait of ancient Israel can have maximum meaning'. It is envisaged that the Bible will need new 'critical readings', which may involve metaphor and allegory. The selection of main events is based on those identified by Albright: the Patriarchs, the Exodus, the religious event at Mt Sinai, settlement of the Promised Land, the United Monarchy, and the nation of Israel.

The stories of the Patriarchs are reviewed and considered to be 'fictitious' and 'imaginative tales'. Dever follows G.E. Wright by placing their setting in the Middle Bronze Age II period in association with the Amorites. After mentioning some of the contemporary evidence such as the texts from Mari and Nuzi, Dever acknowledges that they fit the 'general historical and cultural context' of the second-millennium and so are not 'fanciful' and 'invented', 'These are didactic stories, designed to teach us what we need to know to get on with life, to be fully human' (p. 24). This is rather mistaken. The writers wrote for their first readers, not for people of today. Dever seems to be applying a culture-history model that focusses on the historicity of the text from the perspective of present-day scholarship. However he also says 'If we archaeologists have forced new readings, we also point the way ahead, because in digging up a more *realistic* ancient Israel, we are not burying the Bible' (p. 25 emphasis in the original), which does imply some latitude in his approach.

The narrative of the Exodus and Conquest/settlement is described with all the archaeological anomalies. Dever does not dismiss the story but sees the Judges' account to be more convincing. He argues that the Exodus may have been the experience of one group of Israelites that became the formative narrative of all Israel, just as the experience of the *Mayflower* puritans has become Thanksgiving Day, a core tradition in the United States.

Chapter 4 discusses the end of the Late Bronze Age empires and the period described in the Book of Judges the circumstances of which, according to Dever, 'fits well into' recent archaeological evidence (p. 54). To support this position Dever discusses: settlement patterns, site types, house type, social and economic structure, political structure, technology, art and aesthetic, art and aesthetics, external relations and ethnicity.

The United Monarchy has been another contentious period. Dever discusses the inscription from Tell Dan that refers to David, the water shaft and *millo* at Jerusalem, and Khirbet Qeiyafa in relation to David, and the Tell Qasile ostrakon, Syrian temples and copper sources in connection with Solomon. The low dating proposed by Israel Finkelstein is rejected and he concludes that 'the reigns of Saul, David and Solomon are reasonably attested' (p. 91).

The three-hundred-year history of the divided monarchy is reviewed and contemporary archaeological data

mentioned. There is a large amount of archaeological data for this period but Dever does not give it very much more space than the other periods for which there is less archaeological data, so the subject is considered rather briefly. This imbalance has long been a feature of scholarly study of the Old Testament period. He makes the point that ‘without archaeology, we would know next to nothing about the lives of the largely rural classes and village populations,’ (p. 119). It is archaeology that testifies to the religious practices and behaviour of the population that raised the ire of the prophets.

The subject of religion continues in the final chapter. Dever suggests that ‘the Hebrew Bible is a minority report’ (p. 126). The prospect of the prophets being like precogs as depicted in the film, *Minority Report*, is fascinating but is not developed. Instead, he describes the ancient Israelite polytheistic practices, the Bull cult, *asherah* tree groves, standing stones, the model temples, offering stands, figurines and so forth. The Kuntillet ‘Ajrud inscription and Khirbet el-Qom texts add weight to the argument that for most Israelites, Yahweh was one god among many. Dever does not comment on the presence or absence of pig-bones at excavated sites and the trends in Israelite personal names that incorporate divine appellations. The ambiguities of the Spielberg film are certainly not unlike those of the Old Testament, which are even more profound. Dever does not intend to be the final word, but he has laid the groundwork for further study and contemplation.

The idea that the Hebrew Bible-Old Testament can be studied purely as a literary construct is still common but has become somewhat outdated. Archaeological data, some of which is discussed and reviewed in these two books, provides significant contemporary historical data that no serious study can overlook. Students commencing biblical studies now need to develop an awareness of archaeological methodology and data as well as linguistic skills.

These two books are places to begin the study of Near Eastern Archaeology but their roles are different. Currid’s book provides information about archaeology of the biblical period in Israel without introducing current controversies and engaging with any of the historiographical issues associated with the nature of Biblical Archaeology. It is pitched at a secondary school - first year undergraduate level of understanding. Dever by contrast grapples with the apparent inconsistencies within the evidence and expresses views that many readers will want to debate. It offers a tertiary level approach.

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